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SUBJECT: ABKHAZIA/SOUTH OSSETIA: TURKEY CONCERNED ABOUT RUSSIAN MOVES

REF: STATE 40673

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 b, d

¶1. (C) Turkey shares our concerns about the new presidential instructions to the Russian government to create "mechanisms" to protect the rights of Russian citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (reftel), MFA Deputy DG for South Caucasus and Central Asia Umit Yardim and South Caucasus Department head Firat Sunel told us April 21. Yardim described the moves as "provocative." He underscored Turkey's overall support for Georgia's new Abkhaz autonomy plan, as well as recent South Ossetia initiatives, both of which he said had many positive elements, especially when compared to previous proposals. But he said Tbilisi's release of the offer was botched and badly-timed; the GOG should have presented the proposal directly to the Abkhazians, not through the media, and not days before the NATO summit. The Russians, he said, doubt Georgia's sincerity. He emphasized Turkey's hope for common sense and peaceful outcomes, and said Ankara has expressed its concerns to Moscow.

¶2. (C) While underscoring Turkey's support for Georgia's territorial integrity, Yardim and Sunel pointed out that these latest steps, coming on the heels of Russia's lifting of CIS sanctions, were Russian responses to Kosovo independence (which Turkey supported) and, in particular, NATO leaders' decision at Bucharest to offer Georgia a firm commitment on future NATO accession, even without a Membership Action Plan (MAP). The Turks view NATO membership as a red line for Russia, and Yardim said the next seven months, until NATO FMs meet, will be delicate. Asked if Turkey was reconsidering its position on Georgia's NATO aspirations, Yardim said it was still early but he expected Turkey to continue to support any consensus that emerges within NATO on the issue. Yardim and Sunel also laid some responsibility for this crisis at Georgia's feet, noting Tbilisi's effective withdrawal from the South Ossetia joint control commission (JCC). Turkey had sought to facilitate that process, hosting a JCC meeting in April 2007.

¶3. (C) These latest steps have not particularly riled the Turkish-Abkhaz community, but the community expects similar steps from the GOT, according to Sunel. With Georgian parliamentary elections in May, Sunel did not think Georgia would be ready to approve new contacts between Abkhaz de facto authorities and Turkey or other Turkish measures to ease Abkhazia's isolation. When asked, Turkey will be prepared to play a facilitating role. Yardim and Sunel noted the hitherto successful model of Ajarian autonomy, and Turkey's contribution to that region's stability and economic development. They argued, however, that recent constitutional changes adopted by the Ajarian administration -- now being considered by the Georgian parliament -- undermine Ajara's autonomous status, of which Turkey is a guarantor under the 1921 Moscow Treaty. Turkey recognizes it

is the (pro-Tbilisi) Ajara administration that has put forward these amendments, and does not wish to make this a bilateral issue between Ankara and Tbilisi. However, the Turks see two major problems emerging from the Ajaran constitutional amendments. First, religious freedom for Georgian Muslims will be curtailed, which has the potential to complicate Turkey-Georgia relations. Second, weakening Ajaran autonomy sends exactly the wrong message to Abkhazia and South Ossetia; it will be far more difficult to persuade Abkhazians and South Ossetians they can enjoy an autonomous status within Georgia while autonomy is being undermined in Ajara.

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